

## Transforming Relationships

### #4 – Courage

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In the movie “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy meets up with three characters in the land of Oz who are looking for something important. The Scarecrow is looking for a brain, the Tinman is looking for a heart, and then there’s the Cowardly Lion, who’s looking for something that will make him less cowardly. Do you remember?

“What makes a king out of a slave? What makes the flag on the mast to wave? What makes the elephant charge his tusk in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk? What makes the muskrat guard his musk? What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder? What makes the dawn come up like thunder? What makes the Hottentot so hot? What puts the “ape” in apricot? What have they got that I ain’t got? Courage!” I believe the Cowardly Lion isn’t the only one who needs courage to survive in this world.

Today we conclude our sermon series on Transforming Relationships, in which we’ve been looking at important qualities that will help our relationships with each other reflect God’s love for us. So far we’ve talked about the importance of truly paying attention to each other, of being generous and open to each other, and of practicing humility by putting others first. Today we’ll look at our final attribute of courage, which can not only transform relationships, but if you have some Hottentots sitting around, apparently can really spice them up.

To understand the importance of courage, we first need to understand what it is. Webster’s defines courage as “the quality of mind that enables a person to face difficulty or danger without fear.” Now, far be it from me to question Mr. Webster’s defining abilities, but I disagree here. Instead, I side with Mark Twain, who said, “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear.” I believe being brave is not operating without fear, but living life in such a way that we are not controlled or constrained by our fears.

But that’s incredibly hard to do, because fear is a defining emotion of our world right now. I flew down to Louisville the other day, and while waiting to board I saw one of the pilots heading down the ramp to the plane. And he looked different from me. And for just a moment, I felt this irrational but very strong fear. I hate that I live in a world that causes me to look at people different from me and be afraid. Our world encourages us to define ourselves by saying how we’re different from others, and the emphasis on those differences is the fuel that feeds the fire of our fear.

The other day our daughter Sydney was playing across the street with a few neighbor kids. The phone rang, and it was one of the other moms. She said, “I thought you’d like to know that there’s a man in a white van watching our kids, and I think he’s taking pictures of them with his camera phone.” So I immediately looked out the window and saw what she could not see – that it was a Comcast van and the man was talking on a walkie-talkie phone in such a way that made it seem like he was holding it up and taking pictures. I hate that I live in a world in which I look at every slow-moving car in my neighborhood with suspicion. Is it safe to let my girls play outside? Is it safe to send them to school? Our world is defined by fear.

I believe that fear extends to our relationships. If we are conditioned to look at everything in life through the lens of fear and suspicion, then even our relationships will be contaminated by mistrust and doubt, and that's not the kind of relationships to which God is calling us. There are three ways I believe we can be courageous in our relationships.

The first way we can be courageous is in initiating relationships. It's not easy to start a new relationship. It takes time, it takes effort, and it takes courage. I remember back in college I had my eye on a very attractive young woman, but I was a bit shy and didn't know how to approach her. I'm almost ashamed to tell you now that I asked her out for our first date with an email. I guess that didn't scare her off, because now we're married. But that wasn't very courageous of me.

I think the main reason we lack courage in starting relationships is the simple fear of rejection. Rejection is a lot easier to take over email – I should know! No one wants to not be accepted, so many times we don't risk starting a new friendship because if it doesn't work out, we've wasted all that time and energy. Since we've moved to this area, I've tried to be courageous in starting new friendships; not all of them have worked out, but some have. We'll never know what blessings a new relationship has for us if we aren't brave enough to take the first step.

The second way that we can be courageous is in deepening our relationships. One of the recurring themes I hear in the lives of people around me is a lack of deep, authentic friendships. We have a lot of surface-level relationships, but very few relationships that move past the exterior and are anchored in our core. In order for that to happen, we have to be willing to be honest with the other person, to be authentic with them. That can be scary, because when you put yourself out there like that, you're never sure how that will be received. See? There's that fear of rejection again. And yet, if we're not willing to be open and honest with who we are, not only are we missing out on the blessings of a meaningful relationship, we're not honoring God's call to us to be in community with each other.

I remember the moment when my relationship with my friend Kevin moved below the surface. It was in a Steak-n-Shake. Lots of good things happen in a Steak-n-Shake. We had just seen a band in concert, and were grabbing a bite to eat. I don't remember the specifics of the conversation, but I do remember during the course of our four hours there feeling like God had brought into my life a true friend.

To be honest, I think this level of sharing is a lot harder for men than for women. I've heard that if you send a few church women off on a Women's Retreat, they'll talk about all kinds of things. I'm not sure I want to know any more than that. But guys aren't like that. That's why we started our Man-2-Man program here at church, where each month men are paired up and instructed to spend an hour together getting to know each other better. I applaud the 16 men who have been courageous enough to be a part of this program, and I hope that we get more to be involved. The feedback has been tremendous as these men have taken their Sunday-morning relationships deeper. It takes courage, but by being willing to deepen our relationships, we are able to connect with each other at a level that helps us grow as people of faith.

The third way we can be courageous is in healing our relationships. This may be the most difficult one, because it can involve the most amount of work and requires the least amount of pride. Jesus speaks about reconciliation fairly frequently. In Matthew,

Jesus says we are to initiate a conversation with someone who hurt us, and we are to approach others when we know we've hurt them. Jesus is very clear on the importance of healing our relationships.

But even more profound than his teaching is his example. This is such a tough area. I believe we often know what needs to be done in our relationships, but we're afraid to do it. Why are we afraid? Yeah, rejection. But look at the example of Christ. Through our own sinfulness and disobedience, we humans had separated ourselves from God. God knew what needed to be done to heal God's broken relationship with humanity, so he had the courage to reach out and send us his son to bridge that divide. God took the first step and said, "Here's how much I love you and want to be in relationship with you" and he gave us Jesus Christ.

Did God face rejection by doing this? Of course. Some people are still rejecting Him today. But had it not been for the courage to reach out, we wouldn't know Jesus Christ as our Savior. I'm not implying that we have God's level of courage, but I am saying that if we have the courage to reach out and try to heal a broken relationship, unexpected blessings can occur. Could it not work out? Sure, that could happen. But are we willing to let our fear of a bad outcome stop us from trying to reconcile at all? If we do that, what's driving our life: Fear or faith?

There's an old Islamic saying that goes like this: "You think because you understand one you must understand two, because one and one makes two. But you must also understand *and*." You are one. I am one. The "and" that brings us together is the power of our relationship, the divine web weaved by God that connects us all to each other. As I see it, our responsibility is to strengthen that web. As we grow closer to each other, we grow closer to God. That means we have to pay attention to each other, we have to be generous, we have to practice humility, we have to be courageous. I know all of that takes time and energy. But is there a better investment we can make than an investment in each other? As our relationships grow, so grows the kingdom of God here on earth.